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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, adult educators are using narrative and stories for many reasons, including their deep appeal, satisfaction, and cultural transcendence. As a fundamental structure of human meaning making narrative is a valuable classroom tool in that it can enable students to understand life events, personal actions, and solidify identity formation. Story-based techniques such as storytelling, case studies, critical incidents, role playing, and simulations are often used in the adult education classroom. Autobiographical writing or the life story is a major strand of narrative. It can be useful to a variety of adult students, including those in higher education classrooms, small peer group settings, teacher professional continuing education workshops, and older students. The narrative orientation to education is a metaphor for the developing self and closely related to transformational learning, a hallmark of adult education. (Contains 32 references.) (AJ)

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Narrative and Stories in Adult Teaching and Learning

by Marsha Rossiter

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Narrative and stories in education have been the focus of increasing attention in recent years. The idea of narrative is fertile ground for adult educators who know intuitively the value of stories in teaching and learning. Narrative is deeply appealing and richly satisfying to the human soul, with an allure that transcends cultures, centuries, ideologies, and academic disciplines. In connection with adult education, narrative can be understood as an orientation that carries with it implications for both method and content. This Digest presents a brief overview of a narrative orientation to teaching and learning and then explores how stories and autobiographical writing promote learning.

The Narrative Perspective

A beginning point for a discussion of narrative and story in adult education is an understanding of narrative as a broad orientation grounded in the premise that narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning making (Bruner 1986, 2002; Polkinghorne 1988, 1996). The events and actions of one's life are understood and experienced as fitting into narrative episodes or stories. Accordingly, identity formation and development can be understood in terms of narrative structure and process. In this view, " the self is given content, is delineated and embodied, primarily in narrative constructions or stories" (Kerby 1991, p. 1). The narrative metaphor as applied to adult development (e.g., Cohler 1982; Hermans 1997; Rossiter 1999) sees developmental change as experienced through the ongoing construction and reconstruction of the life narrative. As Kenyon and Randall (1997) comment, "To be a person is to have a story. More than that, it is to *be* a story" (p. 1).

Given the centrality of narrative in the human experience, we can begin to appreciate the power of stories in teaching and learning. We can also see that the application of a narrative perspective to education involves much more than storytelling in the classroom. Such an application necessarily leads to an experience-based, constructivist pedagogy. The basic "narrative proposal" for education holds that the "frames of meaning within which learning occurs are constructions that grow out of our impulse to emplot or thematize our lives" (Hopkins 1994, p.10). Therefore, the most effective way to reach learners with educational messages is in and through these narrative constructions. Learners connect new knowledge with lived experience and weave it into existing narratives of meaning.

The narrative orientation brings to the fore the interpretive dimension of teaching and learning. Gudmundsdottir (1995) notes that pedagogical content can be thought of as narrative text, and teaching as essentially the exercise of textual interpretation. Educators not only tell stories *about* the subject, they *story* the subject knowledge itself. In so doing, they aim to maintain some interpretive space in which the learner can interact with the subject. To tell too much, to provide the answers to all questions spoken and anticipated, is to render the active engagement of the learner unnecessary. To tell too little is to leave the learner with insufficient guidance or support in constructing her or his own meaning and relationship with the content (Leitch 1986).

Stories and Learning

The use of stories is pervasive in adult education practice. Case studies, critical incidents, role playing, and simulations are among the story-based techniques mentioned frequently in the literature (e.g., Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler 2000). Storytelling is perhaps particularly prominent in literacy, English as a second language, and transformative education (e.g., Cranton 1997; Mezirow 1990). Wiessner's (2001) recent inquiry into the use of narrative activities among emancipatory adult educators underscores the prevalence and complexity of such activities. Teacher stories are increasingly used in teacher formation and continuing education curricula (e.g., McEwan and Egan 1995). In short, stories are widely employed as a powerful medium of teaching and learning. But *how* do stories foster learning? The following discussion highlights selected concepts and practices that may help to clarify the dynamics of story-power in adult education.

Stories are effective as educational tools because they are believable, rememberable, and entertaining (Neuhauser 1993). The believability stems from the fact that stories deal with human or human-like experience that we tend to perceive as an authentic and credible source of knowledge. Stories make information more rememberable because they involve us in the actions and intentions of the characters. In so doing, stories invite—indeed demand—active meaning making. Bruner (1986) explains that the story develops the "landscape of action" *and* the "landscape of consciousness"—the element of human intention. As audience, we are engaged with the story on both levels, and it is through this dual involvement that we enter into the minds of the characters and into the deeper meaning of the story. We must fill in, from our own store of knowing, that which is unspoken. In so doing, we create as well as discover meaning, and we pose the questions we ourselves need to answer.

The learner involvement factor is also related to the power of stories to stimulate empathic response. It is the particularity of the story—the specific situation, the small details, the vivid images of human experience—that evokes a fuller response than does a simple statement of fact. This detail provides the raw material for both cognitive appreciation and affective response to the experience of another person. Educational programs that aim to foster tolerance, appreciation of diversity, and a capacity for perspective taking (e.g., Rossiter 1992) draw upon this dynamic of story.

Stories educate as instruments of transformation, as well as information (Jackson 1995). Because stories lead from the familiar to the unfamiliar, they provide an entryway into personal growth and change. As Clark (2001) notes, it is when one can identify with a character who has changed that one can envision and embrace the possibility of change for oneself. Stories of achievement and transformation can function as motivators, pathfinders, and sources of encouragement for struggling adult learners. In short, stories enable us to engage with new knowledge, broader perspectives, and expanded possibilities because we encounter them in the familiar territory of human experience.

Autobiographical Writing and the Lifestory

Autobiographical writing as an activity through which learning is fostered and mediated is a major strand of narrative in adult education. Karpiak (2000) has looked at the use of autobiographical writing with adult students in higher education. In her view, such writing leads to learning and growth as it enables the adult student to bring a sense of order to life, to highlight moments of decision, to bring closure to painful events, and to gain insight into their own development. A somewhat different approach has been developed by Dominice (2000). His "educational biography" process involves each student's preparation of oral and written autobiographical narratives, focused around a life theme chosen by the student. The narratives are presented to and interpreted by a small peer group of students. Other examples include the use of autobiographical writing in continuing professional education for teachers (MacLeod and Cowieson 2001) and in developing library research skills (Lawler, Olson, and Chapleski 1999). These are a sampling of settings in which the value of autobiographical writing is realized: students develop a deeper understanding of their own learning processes and learning goals (Butler and Bentley 1996).

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Because of its obvious connection to life review, reminiscence, and oral history, autobiographical writing is a staple in programs for older adults (e.g., Birren and Birren 1996; Randall 2001). Birren and Deutchman (1991) outline in some detail a process that combines individual reflection and writing with the sharing of lifestories in a supportive group. Guiding themes such as family, career, money, decision points, or loss are suggested as organizing structures for lifestory segments. According to Birren and Deutchman, this process of autobiographical writing contributes to continuing development, ability to adapt to the changes of aging, a sense of integration and fulfillment, and cognitive functioning among older adults.

The connection between the construction of the life narrative and transformational learning is increasingly clear. As Hopkins (1994) has said, "Our narratives are the means through which we imagine ourselves into the persons we become" (p. xvii). The transformative dynamic of the self story lies in the profoundly empowering recognition that one is not only the main character but also the author of that story. White and Epston's (1990) concept of "restorying" experience as a method of family therapy has informed and influenced narrative educational methods (e.g., Fitzclarence and Hickey 2001). Randall (1996), in fact, sees restorying as the central process of transformative learning. The basic idea is that when individuals "externalize" their own stories, they are better able to locate and assess their own stories within larger familial or cultural contexts. The process opens the way for learners to choose alternative narratives. Kenyon and Randall (1997) have developed the restorying process for use by helping professionals, including adult educators, as a method to foster positive life change in learners. The central transformative dynamic is a matter of gaining a more critical and empowered perspective on one's life through telling and interpreting one's self story.

Conclusion

A narrative orientation to education is grounded in an understanding of narrative as a primary structure of human meaning and narrative as metaphor for the developing self. The actual uses of narrative and story in adult teaching and learning are literally unlimited because they arise from infinite expressions of interpretive interplay among teachers, learners, and content. And so we cannot reduce narrative into a handy toolkit of teaching techniques. What we can do is recognize the autobiographical dimension of learning. We can appreciate that stories—like education itself—draw us out, lead us beyond ourselves. And we can conclude that narrative—in its many manifestations—functions as a powerful medium of learning, development, and transformation.

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